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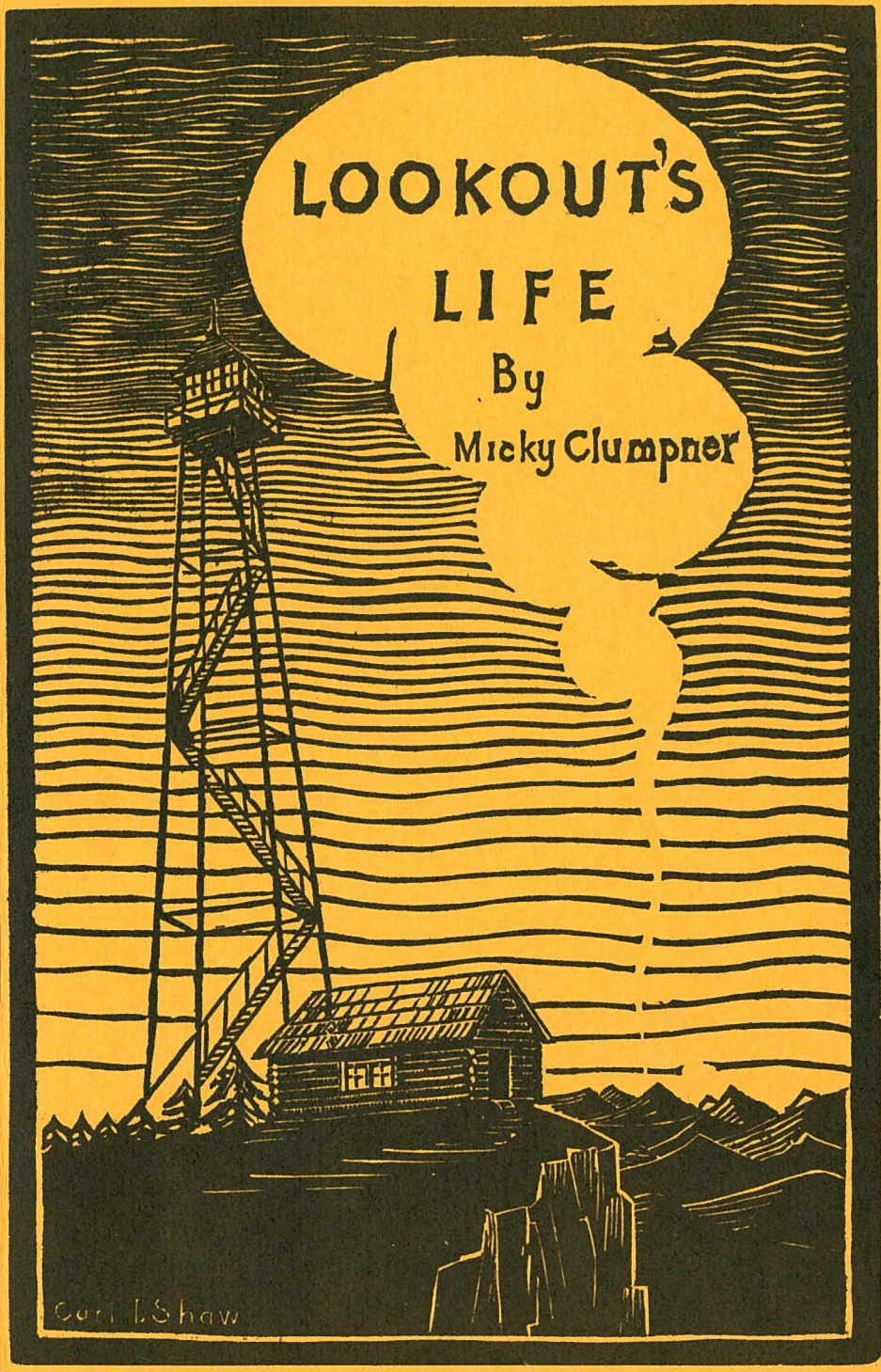

U.S. Forest Service Staff
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from the author
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LOOKOUTS' LIFE

By

MICKY CLUMPNER

Linoleum Cut Cover Design By
Carl I. Shaw

Dedicated to the Lookouts and Guards of the
Coeur d'Alene National Forest

WRITTEN THE SUMMER OF 1932, BUMBLE BEE LOOKOUT

A LOOKOUT'S LIFE

By

Micky Clumpner

Down in the city I heard one day
Some office dude casually say,
"Of all the lazy jobs there are
The Forest Service Lookout is by far
The easiest--why do they pay
A man for a vacation day by day?"
I was lying in a barber chair on my back,
And a wicked razor from the barber's rack
Was cutting the whiskers from under my chin,
So I had to lie there and take it in.
But someday I'd like to meet that chap,
And prove to him my job's no snap;
But just in case we never meet,
I'll sing my song to that man of the street.

The month of August is the month I'd choose
To have you wear my pants and shoes,
To hold my job for thirty days
Before in the city you again could gaze.
And the day starts out with a winding climb
Up the road to Bumblebee where you'll spend your time
Watching the country for smoke to show,
And wishing and waiting for time to go.
The scenery around holds your eager eye,
And you marvel at thunderheads climbing the sky
From over the horizon's jagged rim,
Where the rock peaks stand silent and grim,
With the old twisted firs of the timberline
To frame the picture in weird design.

The second week you'll begin to go stale,
Your hunger for scenery will gradually fail,
While getting up at half-past four
Isn't as thrilling as it was before.
Just looking for smoke that you seldom see
Is a more tiresome job than you thought 'twould be.
Your day's work over, with the water sack
You will go half a mile just to walk back
A steep rocky trail that will gradually stretch
Out two more miles while you painfully fetch
Five gallons of water that weighs a ton,
And gradually changes your idea of fun.
No more will you flip water over the tower rail;
What is left in the cup goes back in the pail.

Now probably this guy, against his wishes,
Would be forced to cook and wash dirty dishes.
Though all your life you thought cooking was swell,
Would find that a hot stove is a new name for hell,
As you cooked your meal on a hot summer day,
While the sweating thermometer climbed to say
Ninety-eight degrees where it hung in the shade,
And the fire in the stove was the hell you'd made.
That isn't the worst--other things you'll do
That seldom appeal to fellows like you.
To dig a can hole on a mountain peak,
Will take from two days to a week,
As you carefully pile the rock there to stay
Until a hungry bear claws them away.

The second week over and the window panes
You wash--to stay clean until it rains,
And then the dust the wind picks up,
Turns to mud to cover the cleanness up.
But you don't mind--it's something to do--
So you clean them again, but before you're through,
A hard-boiled ranger comes riding along,
And sings in your ear this cheerful song:
"Your windows are dirty, and so is the floor.
You may need some wood--better cut some more.
Keep your clothes mended and try to shave.
Haven't you read the blue book I gave
You last week to study and learn the way
Your job should be done to earn your pay?"

He frowns as he sees your little brush piles,
And when he sees the garbage pit, he smiles
As he goes up to it and looks within,
For wasting food is worse than sin.
He pokes in the garbage as he looks with care,
Grumbling and growling like a grouchy bear.
"A little less food in the garbage pail
Means fewer pack trains on the trail."
Disgusted, he sits on the steps of the tower,
And spends, it seems, almost an hour
Telling you to clean up the ground.
As he carefully inspects, he tells you what's wrong;
You sit and worry. Before he goes back,
He's certain to look through your smoke-chaser pack.

Up in the tower above his head,
He unhooks the pack as he walks on your bed.
As he carefully inspects, he tells you what's wrong,
Just a new verse in the same old song:
"Where is your compass? Your folding map?
Your carbide is old and you've lost your cap.
The grubhoe is dull--shovel's all right,
One blade of your axe is surely a fright."
So it goes on, and you cook his dinner;
He makes you feel like a mere beginner,
For he won't help cook and will only say,
"You shouldn't cook steak in such a way,"
And starts a new, a weary tale
That only ends when he hits the trail.

Now from a pocket within his coat
He pulls a letter your best girl wrote
Two weeks ago and you've been waiting for,
To see if she loved you any more.
When you read the letter, your worries increase,
For she's having a gay time--they've taken a lease
Of a cottage at the lake--she's met a nice man,
And they go partying whenever she can.
The folks are all right, hope you're feeling well;
Though the weather is hot, the swimming is swell.
You kind of know the man's got views in mind,
But the letter assures you he's not that kind!
So you fold it up and put it away,
And your job gets your goat for the rest of the day.

As the sun sinks down in the golden west,
Storm clouds hover over the mountains' crest,
And the lightning flickers along a darkening sky.
There's an ominous silence. A leaf whirls by,
Caught by a breath of the coming storm;
The air is cooling--and no longer warm.
You close the windows as the storm comes on,
The wind picks up, twisting trees bow down.
The tower guys whistle in the freshening breeze,
Adding a new note to the roar of the trees.
As the rain splashes drops on the window panes,
You write on the pad, "8:15 it rains."
The strikes are close to the mountaintop,
And you jump and start each time they pop.

The lightning zigzags through the streaking rain,
While the thunder rolls again and again.
You take strike readings as fast as you can,

But, in the meantime, some other man
Has spotted a fire, and the telephone rings,
But you're too busy to hear the song it sings.
Over in the south on the side of a hill
The lightning stabs down. There is a thrill
As a spark shows up to dull a glow,
Blue smoke rolls, and then you know
She's set a fire for you to spot,
So you take the reading with a compass shot.
But you're off the section, a check will show,
When they cross the azimuth from South Chilco.

Now the ranger says, "Grab your pack!
Fly at her, boy, and don't come back
Till she's out cold dead or we
Come up to tell you to let her be."
Quick as possible you put on your coat,
Not forgetting the directions you wrote;
Fill your canteen; grab your pack;
Put in a blanket; swing on to your back.
With your axe in your hand and your hat on your head,
Start off in the rain and the night instead
Of a nice bright day as you thought you would,
And you'll carry more than you thought you could
Over the three long miles by the hemlock trail,
Stumbling over rocks and roots in a roaring gale.

On you toil till you reach a spot
To see the lookout light and take a shot,
Then figure out the miles and degrees.
Eight chains off. Wet to the knees,
You hit the brush on a compass line,
And the lookout's life isn't half so fine.
Stumbling, you fall 'cross a hidden log,
So you stop to rest and cool your dogs.
Try as you will to light your lamp,
Your carbide's no good and your matches are damp!
While you curse all curses on the god of the storm,
A breeze up the canyon, soft and warm,
Brings a thrill to your heart that makes you choke,
Because for a moment you smell fresh smoke!

Fighting through brush with energy renewed,
You find the fire, and it's using for food
A giant hemlock, and over the ground
The fire is spreading all around.
You set to work as you're paid to do,
And you work and sweat the long night through,
Until the dawn. The rising sun
Finds most of your heavy labor done.
The tree is down and the fire is trenched;
You are all in, your clothes are drenched
With sweat you've shed, and your hands are burned.
And now at last you've really learned
That a lookout's life isn't just a snap,
So you roll in your blankets and take a nap.

Only two short hours, and you awake;
Slapping mosquitoes, your breakfast you make.
Eating a meal from rations food
May sound all right, but it's not so good,
For canned hash is seasoned so hot
That you drink water to cool it, and then you've got
Hardtack to chew that can't be beat
As emergency food, but it's hard to eat.
During the day you roll over hot logs,
While you burn your boots and scorch your togs.
Then you mix the ashes well with dirt,
And suddenly realize your blisters hurt.
So it goes on the whole day through,
Till finally a smoke-chaser comes relieving you.

You leave the fire with a thankful heart,
You know darn well you've done your part;
But the trail to the cabin is an endless way,
You'll never forget that terrible day.
You think, "I'll never make it, the trail's too steep.
But just the same, on you keep,
One foot ahead of the other all the time,
Pounding away in a drunken rhyme.
How great the joy when you O.K. in,
And the ranger says, "Better roll in."
So off for a while to the land of dreams,
To hear the alarm clock ring too soon it seems,
And you start life over in the same old way,
But when a storm shows, you have learned to pray.

Over the landscape a dim purple cloud
Hangs heavily and seems to enshroud
All the hills. When the blinding smoke
From burning fires blows in, it's no joke,
For your eyes get tired and ache and burn,
And every way you look or turn
The haze is there to bother you
Till night comes down and day is through.
Thus the third week comes to gradually go;
You're a wiser man--this much you know:
That in a lookout's life there is much unsaid
That doesn't come in stories like you've read.
The romance is gone from such a job,
And the little glass house upon the knob
Isn't such a nice place as it looked to be,
And no longer will you envy me.

Only one week more before you go;
Always the last week will pass away slow.
Finally the day comes. At last you can
Say good-bye to the old frying pan
And go back to the city to stay a spell,
To the little girl you love so well.
Each day that passes you dream along,
Each night that comes you hum a song
Of youth and love, how each have their day,
And both will meet when you go out to stay.
Now the month is up and you welcome me back,
Darned good and glad to pick up your sack,
You step on the gas as you drive to the station,
Thinking of the girl with all elation.

Down in the valley you're glad to be,
And always afterward you'll respect me,
And kind of honor the job I hold,
Because you have lived the story I've told.
Now after you reach home and are feeling better,
You will find in your mail a single letter,
Giving off a delicate, faint perfume
As you gradually open it there in the room.
When you read it, you darn near cry--
Your sweetheart has married some other guy!
If you doubt this tale and ask, "Is that so?"
I've lived and I've written it--I know!